



FILM RECYCLABILITY

Films are on a roll

While plastic bottles get all the media attention and infrastructure investment, plastic films are quietly sitting there, being useful and, sometimes, recycled.

With only 9% of all plastic film currently being recycled, the less visible cousin of the plastic bottle has a valuable role to play in the circular economy, particularly with regards to consumer understanding of standard recycling collections.



With nearly 5million tonnes of packaging films produced worldwide every year and only just over 9% being recycled, it's no wonder that alternatives such as compostable and biodegradable films are widely touted as the best thing since the bag that previously wrapped sliced bread. But the convenient consumer disconnect of buying 'more responsible' packaging vs what happens to it after they put it in with the rest of their recycling means that vast problems are stored up for recycling collection schemes a little further down the chain.

Compostable and biodegradable films don't just happily wilt in normal curbside recycling bins. They contaminate the rest of the haul. So while they're great if consumers have their own compost bin and use it properly, if they throw compostable or biodegradable films into their standard recycling bin, thinking they're doing the right thing, they've actually contaminated the whole of the batch, rendering it impossible to recycle and so more ends up in landfill than before.

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Plastic packaging film is a huge growth industry, with a predicted 8% year on year global growth taking it to around \$46.2bn by 2025. As always, with possibility comes responsibility and, just because the plastic bottles are the ones under the current spotlight, that's not to say that films are getting away easily. Consumer understanding of standard recycling systems could certainly be improved, yet with costly advertising campaigns such as the 'possibilities are endless' from the Waste & Resources Action Programme over a decade ago certainly helping to get recycling into consumer consciousness, the highly specific technical details have, understandably, got some way to go.

Viktorija Griziene, general manager at RETAL Baltic Films, the dedicated films division RETAL Industries Ltd, a global plastic packaging manufacturer, explains how integrating responsibility right from the first stage of films development is integral to the responsible and profitable future of the industry. Griziene says, "It's not enough to rely on very particular consumer behaviour regarding plastic packaging when it comes to a viable circular economy.

Every stakeholder must understand and action their own sphere of influence; for us, it means developing films from recycled material, with added performance benefits, that can be recycled again in the standard collection schemes."

Good growth

RETAL Baltic Films has recently invested over €3m in a third production line that allows it to produce films with up to 100% recycled content as well as permitting a greater use of post industrial waste (PIW) from various hard-to-recycle PET films such as metalised, multilayer, laminated and dark colours. Griziene adds, "This new equipment lets us create new food-grade packaging from all these different materials, which delivers a more circular solution to our customers for their PIW than incineration."

Design for Recycling (DfR) plays an important role in the long-term viability of packaging film not relying on uncontrollable consumer behaviour by integrating greater practical solutions before the packaging has even reached the consumer.

If the aim is that whatever is thrown into the recycling bin can be recycled as standard, investing in equipment that allows for greater use of recycled content and readily accepts the unpopular materials and turns them into food-grade packaging, the worry of whether an item is the 'wrong' material lessens considerably and ensures the maximum volume of recycled content and minimum landfill.

